


“If a tree falls in a forest...” Why REF impact isn’t the only (or best) reason to engage with social media to make an impact

by Blog Admin

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*Unemployment, immigration and health policy are among some of the social science topics debated each weekend in your local pub. Instead of creating new knowledge as an end in itself, **Martin Price** argues that making findings accessible, and comprehensible, to a wider public will make academic ‘impact’ far greater.*



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Whenever the word “impact” crops up in relation to research in universities at the moment, it seems to be inextricably bound up in preparation for the REF. This is, to a degree, understandable. It strikes me, however, that there is more to making an ‘impact’ than just the effect of the REF.

Towards the end of 2011, I established the MYPLACE blog, with the aim of raising the profile of the project and getting our messages out. My motivation for this was not really REF inspired, or in any way linked to metrics. Rather, it was inspired by a question paraphrasing an old and familiar bit of metaphysics about falling trees, and it went thus: If researchers produce findings relevant to society, and nobody hears about them, was there really any point doing the research?

Now, as with the original version (for those interested in its development and attribution to George Berkeley and the possibility of unperceived existence, there is a lifetime of mind-bending material in your local library) we might happily debate the answer to this question for many a happy hour. Nevertheless, even allowing for the creation of new knowledge being an appropriate end in and of itself for academic activity, and highly academic debate and dissemination within our disciplines being crucial for advancing that knowledge, surely we can do more?

Public engagement is important, I believe, for most academic disciplines, and the challenge of explaining your research to lay audiences shouldn’t be ignored. For social sciences the opportunity to do this is perhaps greater than in other disciplines, such as physical sciences. Why? Well, I am prepared to stand corrected, but it has been my experience that if one stands around long enough in the tap room of your local pub you are quite likely to overhear a conversation (complete with fingers jabbed into tables to emphasise a point) about unemployment, immigration, health policy or any number of other things with which social scientists might concern themselves. You are rather less likely, I suggest, to hear the regulars debate the implications of the discovery of the Higgs Boson for Physics’ Standard Model.

So, we have a ready-made audience, and social media gives us a means to reach it. It is for this reason that I continue efforts to persuade sceptical academics to write blogs about their observations of the world. Apart from technological barriers, this is, in effect, marketing. Marketing is probably not something which many academics feel comfortable with, and “popularising” research has long been frowned upon by many.

However, I find, gratifyingly, that most people who I have succeeded in badgering into writing for the blog have found the experience satisfying enough to want to keep doing it. The result has been a succession of interesting pieces from across the project. The reasons, I think, that our academics are beginning to find blogging so satisfying are the usual ones: it’s quick (“I think it took me all of 20 minutes to write” as a member of our Portuguese team told me this week, partly inspiring me to write this piece – the rest of the inspiration follows below), they don’t have to wait months for the reviews and editing associated with full academic papers in journals which allows them to write on current events while they’re still current, and it allows them to reach a wider audience of people who would never have picked up any of the journals they usually publish in.

As our project produces findings from its empirical research over the coming months, it is this process of

reaching out to a wider audience that I believe will see the blog and twitter account come into their own. This week, my main impulse to write this came from a discussion with a young man working on projects to help long-term unemployed young people improve their employability. His view was that this kind of research was “pretty complicated stuff that requires a higher education to understand.” I am determined that this need not, and should not be the case. By making our findings accessible and comprehensible to a wider public, and using the digital technologies at our disposal to make sure it reaches them, surely our ‘impact’ will be far greater? This is, of course, as well as more academic dissemination channels, not instead of them.

It is a key part of ensuring that our trees do not fall unheard in uninhabited forests, if I’m not stretching my metaphor too far. Oh, and since we’re marketing, please don’t forget to have a look at our [blog](#) from time to time, and maybe even follow us on twitter ([@ProjectMYPLACE](#)).

Note: This article gives the views of the author(s), and not the position of the Impact of Social Sciences blog, nor of the London School of Economics.

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